GENDER EQUALITY AS PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL: THE CASE OF THE UK BODY CONFIDENCE CAMPAIGN

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Abstract:

This article argues that gender equality policy may function to cultivate women's 'psychological capital', that is, psychological traits that assist women in becoming better workers and therefore further the interests of capital. It assesses documents produced by the UK Government's Body Confidence Campaign. First, the article finds that the campaign promoted narrow and corporate ideas about gender equality, only treating women's aspiration as valuable if it led them to pursue profitable and traditionally 'male' professions. Second, it finds that despite campaign leaders' criticisms of initiatives that blame women for their own low self-esteem, in practice the campaign ended up doing exactly this, by portraying low confidence as a drain on society and instructing women and girls to 'build resilience'. Finally, the article finds that the campaign allowed companies to receive credit for limited and temporary efforts to appear 'woman-friendly' without overhauling their harmful marketing strategies in the long term.

Key words:

Psychological capital; human capital; gender equality policy; body image; positive psychology; feminism

Gender equality as psychological capital: The case of the UK Body Confidence Campaign

Introduction

Many feminist scholars of public policy have focused on the more obviously economic dimensions of policy. Research in the area suggests that while gender equality can potentially transform government agendas (McBride & Mazur, 2010; True, 2003; True & Mintrom, 2001), most often it tends to align with pre-existing government agendas and in particular with prevailing economic strategies (Bacchi & Eveline, 2003; Franceschet & McDonald, 2004; Squires & Wickham-Jones, 2004; Teghtsoonian, 2004). These insights are developed in the emerging literature on gender equality and human capital, which recounts how gender equality initiatives are made to serve the interests of capital by treating women as an underutilised economic resource to be 'tapped', for example, through measures aimed at encouraging women into work (Prügl, 2011; Calkin, 2015; 2018a; Repo, 2016; 2018). This literature is connected to a broader debate about the relationship between feminism and neoliberal ideology, in which some have described feminism as 'co-opted' by or 'complicit' in neoliberal power structures (McRobbie, 2009; Eisenstein, 1996; Fraser, 2013).

Yet gender equality initiatives do not always centre on workplace skills. A recent example of this is the UK's Body Confidence Campaign, spearheaded by the Government Equalities Office in response to both parliamentary campaigning and burgeoning online activism around women's self-esteem. This is only a recent expression of a lasting trend in the feminist movement. Gloria Steinem's *Revolution From Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (1992) called on women to work on their own selves, drawing connections between self-worth and cultural critique. This was seen by some as a retreat from 'frontline' feminist politics. Barbara Cruikshank's interpretation is somewhat different: she argues that rather than withdrawing from politics, Steinem 'turns self-esteem into a social relationship and a political obligation' (1993: 328). This, for Cruikshank, was just one example of the politicisation of self-esteem. She describes the 1980s self-esteem movement led by the California Task Force on Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, which theorised lack of self-esteem as at the root of an array of political and social ills, such as welfare dependency, drug use and alcoholism, crime and violence, teen pregnancy and child abuse – despite failing to find evidence that low self-esteem had caused these problems (1993: 328-334). In this way, self-esteem became a 'technology of citizenship' (1993: 340) aimed at producing happy and productive citizens. This trend matters, because it risks doing further harm to individuals (especially women) whose psychological 'deficits' are now conceptualised as a drain on society for which they must take moral responsibility.

This article builds on the emerging feminist literature on human capital by adding the category of psychological capital, a term used to denote the positive psychological properties of individuals such as hope, resilience or optimism (Luthans, et al., 2007). Through a case study of the UK's Body Confidence Campaign, it demonstrates how gender equality may be put to work in the service of psychological capital. Throughout the campaign, there was a shift from framing body image in terms of public health towards more overt attempts to frame the issue in economic terms as an 'opportunity cost' to business. The broader lesson from this is that gender equality initiatives seek

to generate psychological capital as well as more traditional, skills-based forms of human capital. Gender equality does not only operate to 'tap' women for their labour hours or for desirable 'innate' feminine qualities such as risk-aversion and maternal altruism (Calkin, 2015), but also operates to cultivate new gendered subjectivities, particularly those of go-getting, confident and successful women. The psychological capital approach allows for a critical assessment of this gender equality initiative: here, feminist framing serves to obscure a narrow, highly corporate valuation of women's aspirations and achievements. This framing also means that deeper feminist critiques of the beauty industry as harmful to women can be absorbed without being properly addressed.

The article begins by briefly sketching out the Foucauldian critique of human capital theory and how this has been adapted by feminists, before elaborating on the concept of psychological capital as an underexplored variant of gendered human capital. It then moves onto the case study, which has three key findings. First, it finds that the campaign treats women as 'misallocated capital' (Calkin, 2015: 616) in its portrayal of women and girls as wasting their time worrying about beauty when they could be focusing on obtaining careers as professionals or entrepreneurs. Second, it finds a focus on empowerment through resilience, in which women are tasked with individually finding ways to overcome negative body image. This focus stands at odds with the overt feminist framing of the campaign and its critique of corporate contributions to poor body image. Finally, the article finds that this feminist framing facilitates good relations between government and industry, allowing some companies to be rewarded for isolated examples of 'good practice' while their longer-term marketing strategies remain untouched.

Human capital, psychological capital

This article follows recent publications by Sydney Calkin (2015; 2018a; 2018b) and Jemima Repo (2016; 2018) in adopting a feminist reading of Foucault's critique of human capital. The critique of human capital made up a central part of Foucault's account of the birth of neoliberalism. In this account, Foucault turned his attention to the work of 'American neo-liberals' associated with the Chicago School of Economics, in particular Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker (Foucault, 2008: 219-233). These two economists criticised classical economics for what they saw as a failure to properly theorise labour. In Schultz and Becker's analyses, labour is conceptualised from the point of view of labourers themselves as something chosen over the possibility of engaging in other (potentially more pleasurable) activities. Labour activity, they theorise, is chosen over other activities in order to produce income. As such, workers come to see their labour activity as reflecting 'an underlying capacity to act as capital, to produce a "future income"' (Dilts, 2011: 136). This view of labour power is captured by the term 'human capital'. Labour in this view has a 'human reality' (Foucault, 2008: 221); it has variable qualities which are attached to different human bodies. It is through the identification and development of these qualities that workers can enhance their income. This leads Foucault to describe the subject of neoliberalism as an 'entrepreneur of himself' (Foucault, 2008: 226; see also Dilts, 2011: 130-1), a person with an interest in accumulating human capital.

To Schultz and Becker, and subsequently in Foucault's analysis, human capital can be innate or acquired. Genetic make-up can contribute, for example, to a person's aptitude for particular tasks, or to the likelihood of contracting an illness; both of these affect their ability to produce incomes and therefore their human capital (Foucault, 2008: 227-8). But all of these authors also place considerable emphasis on the *formation* of human capital through social interventions. This requires, first of all, investment in schooling and training. Yet the formation of human capital in children also rests upon an extensive array of environmental variables, from the parents' educational background, to the amount of time they spend with their child, to the child's relationships, and their health care, exercise and hygiene (Foucault, 2008: 229-239). Thus, all areas of life can be thought of in terms of their contribution towards human capital. Foucault's critique of human capital has recently caught the attention of scholars with an interest in gender equality policy, who have argued that equality policy agendas have sought to harness gendered (and especially feminised) forms of human capital. This is particularly evident when policy initiatives seek to make the 'business case' for equality and diversity, often by arguing that women can bring unique skills and capacities to an institution (Prügl, 2011; Roberts, 2015; Calkin, 2018b).

Calkin (2015) describes how feminised conceptions of human capital have operated in the context of the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report (WDR) on gender equality, while Repo (2016) critiques gender equality initiatives in the European Union. In both cases they find that women have been regarded as a resource to be 'tapped' to serve the needs of development and economic growth. In the WDR, women's entrepreneurship is hypothesised as more risk-averse and therefore less profitable than men's, but more 'bankable' for investors due to the expectation that women will behave 'responsibly' while seeking to do the best for their families (Calkin, 2015: 621). Meanwhile, EU policy documents posit gender equality as a solution to problems caused by changing family structures, high unemployment and demographic ageing. By transforming women into workers and entrepreneurs, policy mobilises women 'to boost the capitalist economy' (Repo, 2016: 314). Policies such as equal pay, family support, parental leave and child care provision are proposed not simply as welfare measures but as incentives for women to have children – and return to work soon afterwards (2016: 320). Gender equality goes to work for capitalism. These human capital initiatives aim both to tap into existing gendered subjectivities (women's supposed greater altruism and risk-aversion) and to cultivate new ones (ambition, entrepreneurialism and career-mindedness).

Calkin hints at a psychological dimension to these initiatives. Alongside 'life-skills training' encompassing sex education to reduce the incidence of unplanned pregnancy (2015: 623), the WDR advocates interventions 'to encourage "positive thinking", "nurture their ambition" and enable women to "better communicate their abilities to employers"' (2015: 624). The feminist policy literature has not explored the psychological aspect of human capital, but psychological capital as a concept is highly developed elsewhere. Accounts of psychological capital generally find its origins in the positive psychology movement. Early advocates of this domain of psychology were concerned about what they saw as the tendency of psychologists to focus on the negative, i.e. on mental illness and pathologies and how to treat or avoid them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson, 2006; Sheldon & King, 2001). In contrast, positive psychology was devoted to the

discovery of 'what makes live worth living' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5), to allow even those not suffering from a mental illness to 'reach a richer and more fulfilling existence' (2000: 10). Originating in the late 1990s, positive psychology is now a major field of study.

The rise of positive psychology is associated with a shift away from an understanding of happiness as grounded in certain social and material requirements, such as wealth, education or professional status. Indeed, according to positive psychologists, very little of human happiness rests on political, economic and social variables. Rather, they hold happiness to follow from individual psychological variables, which can be subject to interventions devised and recommended by positive psychologists (Cabanas, 2016: 468). Happiness thus requires the individual to partake in a process of 'psychological self-optimization' (Binkley, 2011: 94); it is something we must secure for ourselves rather than relying on external forces.

The connection between positive psychology and human capital theory has not been lost on positive psychology advocates. The concept of psychological capital is the expression of this connection, exploited in a swelling body of management and psychology literature aimed at exploring the implications of 'PsyCap' in the workplace (Youssef and Luthans 2011; Luthans et al. 2007; Avey,et al., 2010). Psychological capital is deployed as a supplement to conventional human resource management techniques which develop the 'knowledge, experiences, skills, and expertise' (Luthans et al., 2004: 45) side of human capital. Luthans et al elaborate: if human capital is 'what you know' and social capital is 'who you know', then psychological capital is 'who you are' (2004: 46). Psychological capital consists of characteristics such as hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy (Luthans, et al., 2007: 542). Researchers characterise these traits as 'malleable' (Luthans et al., 2007: 544), somewhere between transient psychological 'states' such as a 'good mood' and fixed 'traits' such as intelligence. In other words, the characteristics associated with psychological capital are changeable and can therefore be subject to intervention. These traits, researchers suggest, may be good predictors of employee effectiveness (Avey et al., 2011; Choi & Lee, 2014).

Critics of the positive psychology movement argue that its goals align with neoliberal goals (Binkley 2011). These critics generally draw heavily on Nikolas Rose's influential account of the role of psychology in governing social life and changing human conduct (Rose, 1998). Cabanas and Sánchez-González (2016), for example, argue that positive psychology inverts the classic humanist approach associated with psychologists such as Abraham Maslow (1943), which conceptualised human wellbeing as the outcome of the satisfaction of physical, social and emotional needs. To positive psychologists, Cabanas and Sánchez-González observe, happiness instead becomes a *condition* of the satisfaction of those needs. Positive psychologists theorise happiness as the cause, not consequence, of a number of social and economic 'goods': productivity and workplace achievement, for starters, but also physical health, lessened use of medication, and stable romantic and social relationships (2016: 109-110). Happiness is therefore a dimension of human capital: it is a quality vital to functioning organisations and economies (2016: 108-109) – and individuals have a duty to be happy.

Following the Foucauldian and feminist critiques detailed in this section, we might come to regard psychological capital as a form of human capital rather than a supplement to it. While Luthans et al. define psychological capital as 'who you are' and human capital as 'what you know' (2004: 46), the characterisation of 'PsyCap' traits as 'malleable and open to development' tells us that they are not innate characteristics of a person but rather can be learned. Consequently, it makes sense to think of psychological capital as comprised of a particular skillset, to be managed and developed by the entrepreneur-of-herself like any other skill.

Research background and methods

Body confidence campaigns in the UK are an excellent example of the confluence of psychological capital and gender equality work. These campaigns have involved a number of interrelated bodies and initiatives. Political interest in body confidence was piqued by a 2012 report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group[1] on Body Image, chaired by the Liberal Democrat MP Jo Swinson. Swinson, along with fellow Liberal Democrat equalities spokesperson Lynne Featherstone, had been working on the issue of body image since 2008. Her foreword to the report painted a disconcerting picture of the state of body confidence in British society:

> A twelve-year old girl dreading going to school each day, refusing to put her hand up in class so she doesn't draw any attention to how she looks. A teenage boy risking liver and kidney damage abusing steroids to boost his pecs and abs. A healthy young woman embarking on a crash diet of cabbage soup for days on end. A middle-aged man feeling shocked and dismayed when his 6 year old daughter asks "Daddy, do I look fat?" (All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image, 2012: 3)

As junior Equalities Minister – and therefore a Minister in the Government Equalities Office – in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government between 2012 and 2015, Swinson drove the issue forward. The Body Confidence Campaign was launched in 2010 by the Government Equalities Office, the UK Government's equality policy agency, and remained one of the Office's major focuses until the 2015 general election, after which the Liberal Democrats were no longer in government (Swinson having lost her own seat in the election). It has been inactive since Swinson and other Liberal Democrats left office. The campaign sought to bring about change with a soft touch, by working with media, industry and advertising to improve their practices around body image, as well as by producing guidance for teachers and youth leaders (Government Equalities Office, 2013a; 2015). The Body Confidence Campaign coincided with the Be Real Campaign, launched in 2014. Be Real was itself founded in response to the parliamentary group report, in partnership with the toiletries brand Dove as part of its ongoing Campaign for Real Beauty initiative. It is chaired by the Labour MP Mary Glindon and coordinated by the YMCA, and is sponsored by the Government Equalities Office alongside a number of beauty brands: bareMinerals, N Brown, New Look, and Superdrug.

The campaign ought not be characterised simply as a top-down initiative driven by a government agency. It in fact had roots both inside and outside of government, in Parliament and in Swinson's own work as a parliamentarian prior to her taking on a ministerial post, in the marketing campaigns of corporations such as Dove, and in the work of myriad body image bloggers and campaigners. The campaign was clearly grounded in feminism, with input from, among others, the feminist

psychotherapist Susie Orbach, as well as several feminist academics conducting research on body image.

I conducted the research via qualitative analysis of documents associated with the campaign. I collected documents via a search of the official UK government publications website (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications). This included all documents hosted on this website associated with the Body Confidence Campaign, apart from those which appear to have been collected, rather than produced or commissioned, by the Government Equalities Office. I also included the parliamentary report on body confidence for comparison with the these documents. Eight documents were compiled in total, many of which were produced in partnership with other government agencies, other organisations, or academics. The Government Equalities Office documents include:

- Two progress reports on the campaign (Governmental Equalities Office, 2013a; 2015).
- Two 'reviews of the evidence' on body confidence, one of which was commissioned from NB Research Ltd (Burrowes, 2013), the other of which was commissioned from the University of the West of England's Centre for Appearance Research (Halliwell, et al., 2014).
- One 'active citizenship toolkit' for use by those working with young people (Government Equalities Office, 2014a).
- Two reports of academic seminars on body image in which the Government Equalities Office participated (Government Equalities Office, 2013b; 2014b).

There are marked similarities between the documents – and some important differences. I employed policy frame analysis to identify dominant themes in each document and to compare similarities and differences between the documents. Policy frames are 'explicit expression[s] of why [an] issue deserves government attention and action' (McBride 2001, 3) and suggest 'what is at stake' (Ferree et al. 2002, 13-14) in policy. For example, body image might be framed as an individual problem or a social problem. It might be framed in gender-neutral terms, or in gendered (and specifically feminised) terms. Different frames suggest different strategies and solutions: for example, if a public health problem is chiefly conceptualised as being the 'fault' of flawed individuals, the proposed policy solutions will focus on how to change individual behaviour. My analysis of the frames was therefore informed by Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem?' approach to policy analysis. This approach asks how policy problems are represented by policymakers, what assumptions underlie this, what effects are produced by this representation and what it leaves unproblematic (Bacchi, 1999: 12-13). I coded and compared frames using the software package QSR NVivo.

Women's misallocated psychological resources

Unsurprisingly, the documents frame body confidence as first of all an issue of equality. While the reports are careful to note that men and boys can suffer from low body confidence – particularly due to feeling that they are not 'muscular enough' – most also present body image as a feminised issue, and therefore an equalities issue. They note that poor body image 'disproportionately affects women', reduces women's power, and 'fuels and is fuelled by the sexual objectification of women' (Government Equalities Office, 2015: 4). In addition, however, body image is also framed

as a public health issue. Across all the documents, lack of body confidence is argued to be linked to a wide range of social ills, including disordered eating, depression, smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, sexual risk-taking, and suicide attempts (All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image, 2012: 161; Burrowes, 2013: 13-15; Government Equalities Office, 2015: 10).

The risks to public health are the main concern of the All-Party Parliamentary Group report, although it is briefly suggested that poor body image can lead to girls avoiding participation in educational and other activities (All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image, 2012: 19). However, it is striking how the framing of the issue changed once it was taken up by a government agency, rather than being solely the domain of backbench parliamentary activism. While the All-Party Parliamentary Group framed body image as primarily an issue of public health (as well as an equalities issue), Government Equalities Office-led initiatives consistently frame it as a human capital (and gender equality) issue by stressing the 'loss' caused to the economy and society. This happened despite the fact that the same individual (Swinson) was driving the issue forward. The Office's 2013 and 2015 progress reports on the Body Confidence campaign stress the detrimental impact of poor body image on girls' and women's 'aspirations' and economic participation, describing women's intensive beauty regimes as 'an enormous waste of women's time, talent and emotional wellbeing' (2015: 5). In her foreword to the 2013 report, Swinson explicitly linked her role as Equalities Minister to her other role as a Minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, suggesting that alongside tackling structural barriers to women's contribution to economic growth, government and society must also tackle 'cultural barriers, which include raising girls' aspirations and vision of all the ways in which they can be valued and fulfilled' (Government Equalities Office, 2013a: 3).

This theme is taken up in an 'active citizenship toolkit' developed by the eating disorder charity Beat and the psychologist Helen Sharpe, with funding from the Government Equalities Office. It was developed for use by the National Citizenship Service, a voluntary personal development programme for teenagers launched by the Coalition government in 2011. The toolkit frames body image as an issue of citizenship and 'civic participation' (Government Equalities Office, 2014a: 4), and poor body image as 'starting a negative spiral of lowered aspirations and achievements' (2014a: 5). It cites research commissioned by Dove purporting to show that 'lowered self-esteem among girls and young women could, by 2050, be costing the nation:

- 14% of our female managers in UK businesses.
- 16% of our British female Olympic medallists.
- 21% of our female MPs
- 17% of female doctors and lawyers
- And reduce the chance of a female Prime Minister in the UK by 2050 by 18%' (2014a: 5).

Body image is here very explicitly presented as a threat to human capital. However, the foremost effort to formulate body image in terms of human capital comes in the form of a report titled *Costing the Invisible*, commissioned by the Government Equalities Office and produced by the University of the West of England's Centre for Appearance Research (Halliwell, et al., 2014). This report effectively makes the business case for body confidence, portraying poor body image as an obstacle to women's capital being effectively utilised. Swinson's foreword explains:

> We thought there might also be research showing links with educational and workplace achievement, and from there we could start addressing a question begging to be answered: what are the opportunity costs to the economy, and to civic life, of poor body image? This is the resulting report. The authors assert that there is evidence associating poor body image with girls' reduced educational and social participation, with reduced confidence and performance levels, and with levels of cognitive functioning. Given the high levels of poor confidence revealed in a growing body of research, that is extremely worrying. Inevitably, it raises the question of consequences: what more could women and girls achieve if they were set free from constant self-vigilance and self-judgement (Swinson in Halliwell et al., 2014: 5)?

The theme of 'opportunity costs to the economy' continues throughout the document. Time and energy spent on beauty maintenance is taken to hinder women and girls' educational attainment and thereby their professional attainment. This begins in education, as '15% of girls stay away from school on the days they feel bad about their bodies, 13% won't give an opinion, 5% will not go to a job interview, 3% will not go to work' (Halliwell et al., 2014: 12). Low body confidence goes on to become a 'burden' for working women (Halliwell et al., 2014: 17), affecting women's performance and sometimes resulting in missed work days. The notion of 'opportunity costs' operates similarly here to the conceptualisation of women and girls as 'misallocated capital' (Calkin, 2015: 616) in the World Development Report. In Calkin's account, development initiatives treat women and girls as a resource that can be 'tapped' by promoting their entrepreneurship in order to produce sustainable economic outcomes. The Body Confidence Campaign similarly expresses the concern that women's psychological resources are being misallocated – squandered on stressful beauty regimes and 'constant vigilance' against image defects when they could be spent on educational and career aspirations. The Campaign reflects a broader trend of framing gender equality in terms of its 'business case' (Prügl, 2011; Roberts, 2015); that is, the advantages that might accrue to the economy or individual companies as a result of undertaking equality initiatives. However, it is also an unusual area of policy to see such framing in play.

There are questions to be asked here about how women's career aspirations are valued when women are portrayed as misallocated capital. Despite extensive searching and a direct request to Dove, I could not obtain a copy of the Dove-commissioned report purporting to show the numbers of female managers, doctors and lawyers 'missing' as a result of low self-esteem. However, the *Costing the Invisible* report summarises its methodology (Halliwell et al, 2014: 31). The study modelled expectations about 'job competence' in girls aged 11-17. It found that girls with high body confidence were more likely to think that they would be good at professional jobs than girls with low body confidence, with this effect being particularly strong among girls classed as 'high achievers'. There was no such effect when girls were asked how well they would perform as cleaners, hairdressers, childcare workers or fashion designers.

The study authors extrapolate from this that girls with low body confidence will be less likely to go on to professional careers (Halliwell et al. note briefly that this prediction 'could be debated' [2013: 31]). Both the *Costing the Invisible* report and the quoted sections of the Dove report frame this effect as '[depriving] the country' of professionals and entrepreneurs (2014: 17; 31). The language used here, alongside the ranking of 'professional jobs' against apparently more lowly stations, is worthy of comment. The language of 'deprivation' suggests that it is better to be a

business professional than a hairdresser or childcare worker and that those who choose the latter routes have been 'misallocated'. Implicit in this is the devaluation of women-dominated professions. The documents only value women's aspiration insofar as they wish to pursue profitable and traditionally 'male' professions; there is little room here for women to define their own aspirations.

Empowerment through resilience

The documents suggest a raft of solutions to women's poor body image. Sometimes these focus on the individual and her ability to manage body confidence issues, often drawing (implicitly or explicitly) upon positive psychology and in particular the concept of individual psychological resilience. The 'active citizenship' toolkit advocates building resilience and is geared around the idea that psychological capital is a skill that can be developed. It does so by teaching children to identify and challenge negative messaging around body image, stop 'negative appearance-related self-talk' (Government Equalities Office, 2014a: 12), identify personal strengths (2014a: 13-14; this section cites the work of prominent positive psychologist Martin Seligman), and pass on these skills to other children (2014a: 16).

Meanwhile, the 'rapid evidence assessment' of body image research (Burrowes, 2013) suggests that individuals suffering from low body confidence should increase their individual resilience, maintain a 'normal' body weight, and compare themselves to others less frequently. These measures are grouped together as 'factors which have the potential to change', and contrasted against 'factors such as age, ethnicity, gender which are fixed' (2013: 21); here, the assessment portrays gendered and racialised social structures as beyond the reach of policy, which instead must focus on encouraging individuals to change. The account of gendered social structures as 'fixed' is not replicated across the documents; most call for social and cultural change alongside individual change. However, the promotion of 'individual resilience', with all its positive psychology connotations, remained an explicit strategy throughout the campaign (Government Equalities Office, 2013a: 8; 2015: 10). There is a tension between the individualistic solutions proposed and the campaign's call for broader societal change.

The approach towards self-esteem in the Government Equalities Office documents is reminiscent of how self-help manuals for women aim to develop the modern woman as an entrepreneur-of-herself, with an eye to developing not only her practical work skills but in learning how to manage her life plans and work stress and model herself as a confident and successful individual (Bröckling, 2005). These manuals are upfront about the existence of external barriers for women to overcome, i.e. sexism, but also rest heavily on the diagnosis and correction of feminine deficits supposed to be standing in the way of career success, such as a 'proclivity toward self-denial' (2005: 16) or being too self-conscious. The business case for women's self-esteem is thereby made. This approach is also evident across corporate-led campaigns for positive body image, which tend to blend feminist language with notions of 'empowerment via consumption in the marketplace' (Murray 2013: 83; see also Gill and Elias 2014; Gill and Orgad 2015). Such initiatives similarly seek to develop psychological capital as a skill, and often draw explicitly on positive psychology.

Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2015) have noted the heavy influence of positive psychology in the promotion of 'confidence' to women and girls. They argue that while the language and aims of such campaigns are 'apparently feminist' (2015: 330), their implications are troubling. Confidence here takes the form of a moral imperative, a practice that both girls and adult women are obliged to participate in in their pursuit of success. Key for Gill and Orgad is the turn away from critique of social structures and how they produce inequality; rather, the solutions offered 'are focused primarily on changing women's psyches and behaviour' (2015: 333). In the process, 'confidence' campaigns make feminism 'safe' (2015: 330) for neoliberal capitalism by turning it away from structural critique and towards self-improvement.

The Government Equalities Office campaign sits somewhat uneasily within this narrative. For starters, there is a consistent critique of media images in the documents, as well as more thoroughgoing social critique (unsurprising given the involvement of prominent feminist authors such as Orbach). Even *Costing the Invisible*, the document with the most overt concerns about human capital, is careful not to portray low body confidence as the fault of the individual. Swinson's foreword explains:

> Framing body image as an issue of personal and individual anxiety – with the suggestion that women can somehow be jollied or reassured out of it – tends to absolve us from acknowledging what it is we are doing to women when we allow them to feel scrutinised, judged and objectified from such a young age. It allows us to think that poor body image is something young people are doing to themselves, rather than something that is being done to them (Swinson in Halliwell, et al., 2014: 4).

The report on an academic seminar titled *The Watched Body* again states this firmly:

> Have we given up changing the world to focus on tweaking our responses to it? We put the responsibility on young women to remain impervious to the cultural messages that bombard them every day, but as a society we are all responsible for querying and challenging these messages (Government Equalities Office, 2014b: 6).

In this way, the body confidence campaign simultaneously incorporated and challenged positive psychology approaches. Instead of locating the problem of low body confidence entirely within the individual, the Government Equalities Office called for broader social change, and working with media and industry in order to change their messaging around appearance was a key activity. A (limited) feminist critique of the advertising, fashion and beauty industries was thereby articulated alongside the call for individual resilience. This stands in contrast to many policy articulations of resilience – which tend to reject the notion that social structures can be altered (Amery, 2018) – and suggests that feminism was not turned wholly away from structural critique. However, there was an ambivalence within the campaign. Its overarching human capital framing meant that in practice, confidence was still treated as a moral imperative. This is because lack of confidence was consistently conceptualised as a drain, not only on the individual but also on her ability to contribute productively to society in certain prescribed ways requiring entry into professional fields. In doing so the campaign could not avoid implying that individuals have a duty to society to be confident.

Feminism and corporate responsibility

The Government Equalities Office pursued its demand for woman-friendly with a soft-touch approach, through the creation of 'good practice guidance' for industry (Government Equalities Office, 2013a: 9). Both progress reports use the retailer Debenhams, which introduced UK size 16 mannequins into its shop windows in 2010, to highlight good practice. They praise the mannequin trial for '[demonstrating] a wider range of body and beauty ideals' (2013a: 7) and '[allowing] a much wider range of customers to enjoy the full shopping experience' (2015: 14). Also mentioned is Debenhams' 2013 'Diversity Lookbook', described by the Government Equalities Office as 'pioneering' for its inclusion of a Paralympian, an amputee and a plus-size model, all aged over 40 (2013a: 7).

Many will welcome the introduction of a wider range of body ideals, as well as the campaign's criticisms of poor practice elsewhere in the industry such as Topshop's use of 'extremely skinny mannequins' (Government Equalities Office, 2014b: 6). However, further scrutiny provides reasons to be cynical about the long-term prospects of these initiatives. While the documents herald the 2013 Diversity Lookbook as a sign of progress, Debenhams' 2018 Autumn/Winter Lookbook was decidedly less diverse, featuring only one model: a slim, able-bodied white woman (Debenhams, 2018). A glance over past Lookbooks reveals that while they sometimes feature black and Asian models, the beauty ideals on display are typically narrow – young, tall, slim, able-bodied and (usually) white (Debenhams, undated). Meanwhile, mannequins used in Debenhams branches in 2019 are very thin – a far cry from the size 16 mannequins rolled out in 2013. This suggests that even in cases highlighted as best practice, change has in effect been limited, marginal and unsustained. Meanwhile, the government has resisted calls for a firmer approach to governing the issue through regulation.

There is, then, a clear gap between the feminist framing of the campaign and its outcomes. However, one could go further than this and assert that far from disciplining industry, feminism has gone to work here to facilitate good relations between industry and government. In the body confidence campaign, the concept of confidence both works to develop psychological capital at the level of the individual, who is exhorted to become 'resilient', *and* means that some corporations within the beauty industry – those which supported the campaign – can be rewarded for 'good practice' in promoting positive body image. This allows them to escape feminist critiques of the industry's promotion of misogynist ideals. Companies such as Debenhams may receive praise – and publicity – for fleeting efforts to promote 'body confidence' and 'diversity', while ultimately returning to their usual practices. Dove is another company that has reaped a lot of goodwill for its messaging around body image, despite the fact that its parent company Unilever also markets projects with decidedly less woman-friendly images: 'Slimfast (a diet plan), Fair & Lovely Fairness Cream (a skin lightening product), and Axe deodorant (whose advertisements, targeted at men, portray objectified women)' (Murray, 2013: 96).

This part of the analysis can be linked to a broader feminist literature on corporate social responsibility initiatives and the use of public-private partnerships to promote gender equality (Prügl and True, 2014; Roberts, 2015). This literature finds that these initiatives typically help sustain, rather than challenge, the structural causes of gender inequality. Pertinently for this

analysis, feminist scholars have also suggested that such initiatives naturalise and depoliticise (Roberts, 2015: 222) the growing power of corporations to intervene in policy debates and implement policy. Where gender equality initiatives are adopted as 'good business sense' (Roberts, 2015: 210), feminist perspectives are not only made 'safe' (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 330) but are put to work for capitalism. Analysis of the Body Confidence Campaign reveals that gender equality can be put to work in the service of psychological capital as well as in the development of more traditional, skills-based forms of human capital. Indeed, feminist perspectives on body image and self-esteem seem to be ideally suited to this task. This is not a wholly new development. However, research on gender and public policy has neglected the 'psy' dimensions of gender equality at a time when British social policy is increasingly aimed at the psyche (Amery, 2018).

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that gender equality policy may be used to develop women's psychological capital as well as other forms of human capital. This has in particular involved the exploitation of feminist narratives around self-confidence and body image. Yet in governmental accounts, the 'losses' resulting from low body confidence do not represent only harm at the level of the individual but are also framed in terms of missing 'achievements' and 'contributions' – the 'opportunity costs to the economy'. Following Calkin, we might describe this framing in terms of 'misallocated resources' (Calkin, 2015: 616); according to this logic, women waste time and energy worrying about their appearance when they could be bolstering their achievements in education and in the workplace. The aim of body confidence programmes is to reallocate women's psychic resources more efficiently.

While research is currently lacking, we might expect psychological capital to be similarly deployed within gender equality policy in other national contexts. Researchers have observed the conceptualisation of girls' confidence as an individual commodity throughout the Anglosphere, in city-level public health drives (Banet-Weiser, 2015) and in magazines and self-help culture (Gill and Orgad, 2015), if not yet in government policy. Attempts to intervene at the level of individual psychology are not unusual in British social policy, which over the last decade has attempted to promote individual resilience across a number of disparate policy areas, including education, health, crime and unemployment. Resilience initiatives in these areas address the capacity of the individual to 'bounce back' or adapt to adversity, and generally position the gendered, racialised and economic social structures that generate adversity as 'beyond the control' of policymakers (Amery, 2018). Resilience often therefore has a deeply depoliticising effect. A psychological capital approach might fruitfully be used to analyse policy addressing issues such as race and poverty as well as gender inequality.

Any account of gender equality as a human capital initiative raises questions about whether feminism is 'complicit' in, or has been 'co-opted' into, capitalist power structures (McRobbie, 2009; Eisenstein, 1996; Fraser, 2013). Indeed, Dara Persis Murray's critical account of the Dove

Campaign for Real Beauty describes feminism as 'co-opted' by the campaign, ultimately functioning to sustain corporate interests without 'revolutionising' social structures (Murray, 2013: 97). Nancy Fraser's assertion that neoliberal capitalism is sustained by a 'romance of female empowerment' (2013: 220) out of step with reality certainly seems relevant here. The Body Confidence Campaign offers a romantic vision of female aspiration and liberation, but closer reading suggests that it defines aspiration narrowly in corporate terms and that its efforts to change corporate practice on body image have had limited effect.

As Janet Newman has noted, accounts of the co-optation of feminism can be one-sided. While feminism has certainly been 'functional to neoliberalism', neoliberalism has itself had to 'flex' to accommodate feminist demands: 'employers came to bear the "costs" of equality governance, parental leave and more complex patterns of work demanded by women's entry as full-worker citizens' (Newman, 2013: 207). But where exactly did 'flexing' happen in the Body Confidence Campaign and the discourse it generated? Industry did flex somewhat due to increasing pressure to accommodate body diversity: for example, after sustained public backlash, Topshop eventually pledged to stop ordering a particular model of 'ridiculously tiny' mannequin (Conlon, 2015). However, as discussed above, change has not been radical, whereas feminism seems to have flexed a great deal – despite the stated aim of 'changing the world' (Government Equalities Office, 2014b: 6).

Adopting a psychological capital approach allows for critical assessment of the function of feminist ideas in the campaign. On its face, the feminist framing adopted in many of the documents seems to belie the criticism voiced by many scholars that body confidence campaigns treat confidence as a moral imperative: instead of blaming individuals, they say, we should look to change society. Yet the consistent presentation of low body image as a 'loss' to society and the economy works against this, as does the valuation of aspiration in terms of its economic usefulness. Moreover, there is a gap between the framing of the campaign and its outcomes. The promotion of 'confidence' has allowed certain brands to reap short-term gains from their self-portrayal as socially conscious, without necessarily altering their marketing strategies in the long term.

[1] All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal, cross-party groups run by members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

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